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ABSTRACT

The idea of making college students more comfortable with their campus environment through involvement in extracurricular activities, thus helping them remain in school, has never been argued by those in the college union field. Nevertheless, efforts and theories in this endeavor have been rarely supported by research and evaluation. Reliable and valid research data can help higher education institutions properly invest in housing, student centers, and recreational facilities and programs for students. The Schine Student Center (Syracuse University, New York) administration and directors of units housed in the student center developed a comprehensive plan for the evaluation of their center including the physical environment, programs offered, and the impact of the Center on student quality of life. With the use of interviews, surveys, focus groups, and record analysis, the Center administrators learned two major lessons: (1) that this type of research is time-consuming and expensive requiring a major commitment, and (2) that most of the college student's intellectual development occurs outside of the classroom, and if a proper space is provided, adequate programs developed, and adequate public notice given about scheduled events, the learning environment becomes stronger, and thus, the university becomes stronger. Contains 4 references. (GLR)

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A Schine-ing example:

How to evaluate the college union

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The research for *College: The Undergraduate Experience* (Boyer 1987) appeared to enlighten many universities about the importance of involving students in activities outside the classroom in order for them to persist till graduation. Astin's theory of student involvement as described in *Achieving Educational Excellence* (Astin, 1987) reinforced that extracurricular activities make students more comfortable with their environment, thus influencing them to remain at school. Many of us in the union field argue this was no revelation; *we* have known this all along. Unfortunately, we have rarely supported our efforts and theories with research and evaluation.

To become effective leaders, student services administrators must apply research and evaluation to their programs (Garland, 1985). Obtaining feedback on the services we offer and using this information to improve the quality of our program should become routine in our annual planning process. In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1987), Tinto argues that although national publications and related studies provide an aggregate look at issues of involvement, they are not sufficient in assessing patterns on individual campuses. This argument holds true for assessing the union and activities program on a campus. Assessment will

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help college union administrators better understand their students' needs.

Higher education institutions invest substantial sums in housing, student centers, and recreational facilities and programs for students. Reliable and valid research data are essential for good decision making when planning new facilities and programs. In addition, evaluations collected over time are necessary to ensure that facilities and programs are meeting their initial goals and objectives as conditions change.

Unfortunately, few student service units go beyond routine student "needs assessment" data. Usually missing is any comprehensive plan for data collection, analysis, and reporting that gives administrators a steady stream of information tailored to meet their short-term and long-term decision-making needs (Baigent, Eickmann, & Froh, 1988).

The Student Services Division at Syracuse University had a commitment to assessment and identified evaluation as a necessary part of its Student Center action plan. When the Schine Student Center was dedicated in 1985, Peter Baigent, assistant vice president for student programs, solicited the assistance of Syracuse University's Center for Instructional Development to design a comprehensive Schine Student Center assessment program. What evolved was a very effective evaluation team that included Baigent, Paul Eickmann, vice president of student affairs; Toby Peters, director of student centers and activities; Peter Gray, director for evaluation and research at the Center for Instructional Development (CID); Robert Froh, associate director for evaluation, Center for Instructional Development; and Barbara Yonai, assistant in evaluation and research, Center for Instructional Development. The Schine Student Center administration and directors of units housed in the Student Center raised questions they wished to address while the Center for Instructional Development and Testing Services staff provided the theoretical basis and technical skills needed to design and execute the evaluation process.

Questions

The comprehensive plan for the evaluation of the Schine Student Center identified three areas for study:

- Physical: the quality of the environmental elements of the Student Center, such as comfort, cleanliness, safety, and general appearance.
- Program: the range and quality of programs and services offered.
- Impact: the effect of the physical building as well as the programs and services offered on the campus community and the quality of campus life.

Student services administrators and unit directors met several times to identify the exact questions people wanted answered about physical and program issues. Both groups shared concerns about the hours of operation, facility appearance, perceptions about personnel, and the Student Center's demographic profile. In addition, the unit directors wanted specific information about their areas. For example, the bookstore director wanted to know how customers perceived the type and display of merchandise.

Photos by Steve Sartori

The bookstore director needed to know how customers reacted to merchandise displays.

Once the group had stated the important issues, it identified the various groups of respondents: students, faculty, staff, alumni, visitors. Students, in particular, were divided into two groups: users and non-users of the Schine Student Center.

Outlining the questions for the impact portion of this evaluation took more time. After numerous meetings, student services and Student Center representatives decided to ask both users and non-users such specific questions as "Do you go to the Schine Student Center to study?" and such global questions as "What is the impact of the Schine Student Center on campus?" This aspect of the evaluation was incorporated into a campuswide Student Perception of Student Life survey.

Techniques

The challenge was to find cost-effective and efficient methods of gathering diverse information. Techniques included interviews, mailed surveys, on-site surveys, record analysis, and focus groups. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of the results, the evaluation team coordinated the design and implementation of each technique with the primary client for each administrative unit.

Two types of interviews were conducted. The CID evaluation team used semi-structured interviews with Center staff to learn about managerial aspects of the Schine Student Center. The dining area and bookstore staffs used structured interviews in gathering their data. This type of interview allowed dining and bookstore personnel to interact directly with their clients and to follow up on unclear responses. They not only collected important data but enhanced their public relations as well.

Mailed surveys gathered information from people who may or may not have been direct users of the Student Center. For example, recent graduates were surveyed about their perceptions of the Placement Center which is located in the Schine Student Center.

On-site surveys developed for the various areas within the Student Center included items consistent across all surveys and items specific to each area. For example, all on-site surveys included Center-wide questions about hours of operation, general appearance, general cleanliness, convenience, and competence of the staff. Unit-specific concerns included, for example, questions about services and prices in the Dining Center. Combining Center-wide and unit-specific questions on the on-site surveys was cost effective.

For the first three years, the surveys were administered during the fall and spring semesters. Now that this baseline data has been established, they are now distributed in the fall only. To reduce overall costs and to give units ownership of the process, personnel in each area distribute and collect the surveys.

Records already being kept throughout the

Student Center provided additional information about the questions posed by unit directors and student services administrators. For example, building managers were already regularly sampling traffic flow patterns. This information was used to determine the most appropriate operational hours of the Student Center. It also helped indicate the best times to distribute the survey.

Focus groups (small groups whose leader uses a structured interview to focus on a particular topic) were used where there was a small, well-defined population and a well-defined issue. For example, when the administration was considering renovation of the game room, club, and a multi-purpose area, focus groups were formed. The staff of the Center for Instructional Development led the focus groups, which were composed of student leaders and Student Center personnel. This gave student leaders an opportunity to share their concerns with administrators, thus generating a positive relationship between them while providing administration with valuable information.

During the last four years, all of these techniques have been used and refined. Program changes such as the addition of music in the game room warrant the inclusion of new items periodically.

To gather information about the impact of the Center, the evaluation team refined the Student Perceptions of Student Life survey, which had been administered to a sample of students several times during the '80s. In fall 1986, both the general question section and the special topics section of the SPSL included questions about the Center. For the past three years, this survey has been mailed to a 10 percent sample of the student body which included both users and non-users of the Student Center.

ON-SITE SURVEY TOTALS
EVALUATION SUMMARY

Item	Fall '97	Spring '98	Fall '98	Syracuse campus profile
# of respondents	1,000	1,000	1,000	19,700
Status				
Student	91%	95%	95%	NA
Faculty/Staff	5%	5%	5%	NA
Alumni/Guest	4%	0%	0%	NA
Gender				
Male	49%	49%	51%	49%
Female	51%	51%	49%	51%
Institutional Affiliation				
SU	90%	94%	95%	95%
ESF	3%	3%	1%	NA
CCP	1%	1%	1%	NA
OC	3%	2%	3%	NA
Other				
Housing				
North Campus	39%	39%	31%	39%
Village housing	4%	3%	4%	3%
South Campus	20%	19%	19%	19%
Greek housing	9%	8%	8%	NA
Off-campus apartment	27%	41%	35%	39%
Other	1%	4%	3%	NA
Class				
Freshman	18%	14%	13%	19%
Sophomore	20%	20%	20%	19%
Junior	21%	26%	27%	18%
Senior	39%	27%	31%	18%
Graduate	10%	11%	11%	27%
Unclassified	NA	NA	NA	7%
Ethnic Group*				
Black	14%	10%	13%	6%
Caucasian	79%	79%	71%	87%
Other	10%	11%	16%	4%
Undeclared	NA	NA	NA	3%
International Student				
Yes	10%	9%	10%	10%
No	90%	91%	90%	90%
Use of area				
First visit	5%	3%	7%	NA
Once a day	19%	21%	22%	NA
3-5 a week	43%	39%	39%	NA
Once a week	17%	18%	18%	NA
Every other week	10%	9%	10%	NA
Once a month or less	7%	10%	7%	NA

* percentage based on those respondents who indicated ethnic group

Figure 1

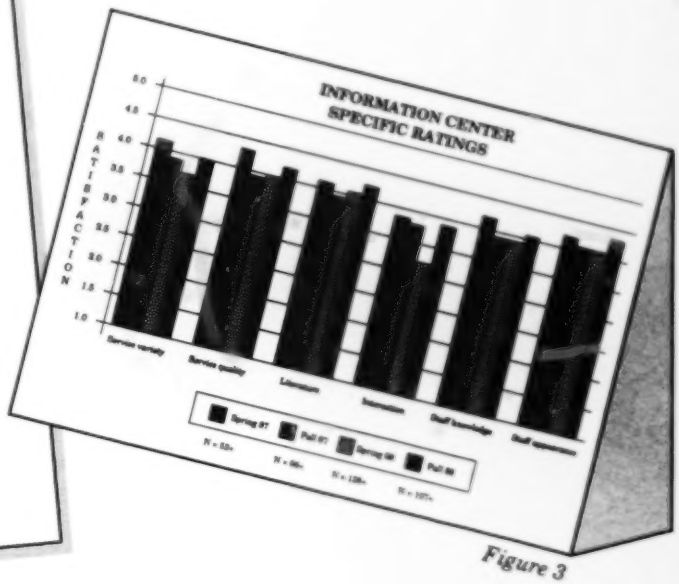

Figure 3

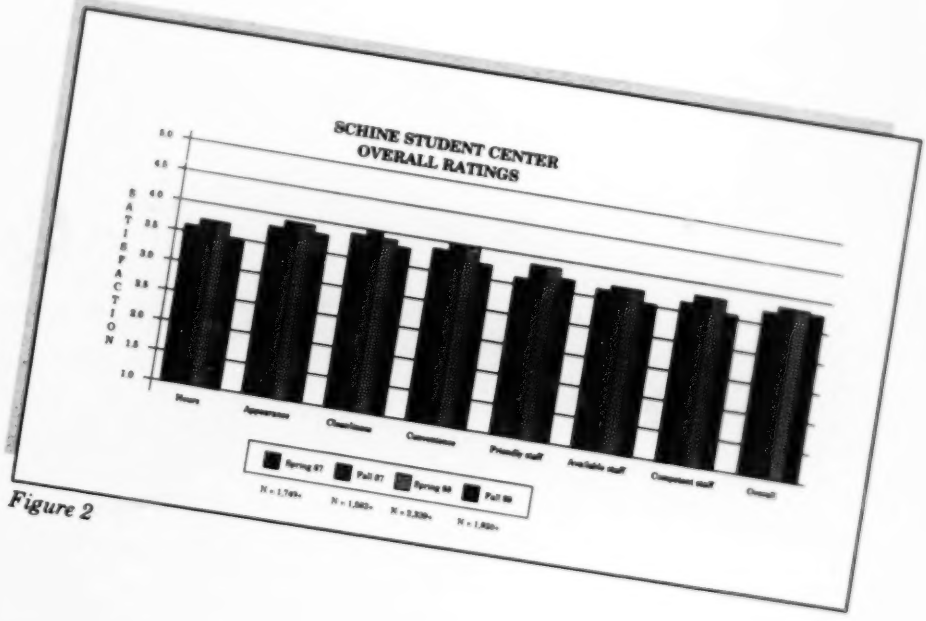

Figure 2

Data analysis and reporting

Testing Services and the Center for Instructional Development designed the data analysis and reporting formats with input from the evaluation team. Throughout the process, the evaluation team checked drafts to ensure the final product would be understandable and useful. Due to the administrative structure of the Schine Student Center, area-specific information was reported only to the area directors, who could then decide whether to share the information with other administrative staff.

On-site survey results were reported for each area as well as the Student Center as a whole. Each area director received the report for the Center and the report on his or her area. Data from previous surveys were included so that comparisons could be made. Demographic data were reported in table format (see Figure 1). Other quantitative data were reported in chart format. Figure 2 is an example of this chart for the Schine Student Center as a whole. Figure 3 is an example of a chart an area director receives. Responses to open-ended questions were reported verbatim and organized by major categories of response. In addition, area directors and student services administrators received narrative summaries.

The interviews and focus group results were reported to student services administrators in narrative format. Results from the mailed surveys were reported using a combination of narrative and graphic displays similar to those used for the on-site surveys.

What have we learned?

These evaluations taught us two major lessons. First, the evaluation process is time-consuming. The exact time frame depends on the depth of the evaluation. Making a commitment and obtaining funding are perhaps the most time-consuming tasks.

Using a variety of techniques strengthens the evaluation. The five methods we used provided a range of qualitative and quantitative information from numerous sources cost effectively. Both focus groups and interviews are inexpensive but effective evaluation techniques. Using in-house staff to formulate questions and distribute surveys can reduce the cost of the remaining techniques. If professional evaluation resources are unavailable, recognize the limits of internal resources but also realize that any information is useful.

Once a commitment is made and funding is in place, formulate an evaluation team. The evaluation team should include individuals who have a stake in the outcome. This stimulates their ownership in the process; therefore, the results have greater value to them. The evaluation team determines the questions, identifies the appropriate techniques, determines the audiences for the information, and decides how the information is to be used.

The second lesson concerns what we learned about the Schine Student Center itself. A 1981 study completed by Syracuse University's School of Arts and Sciences concluded:

> *Much of the contribution to a college student's intellectual development occurs outside the classroom. If the role of non-classroom activity is so prominent in the lives of our students, then we must meet the challenge of ensuring a wide range of activities, adequate public notice of event schedules, and appropriate space accommodations. There is a continuing concern among students, faculty, and staff about the lack of an adequate centralized facility in which to conduct student activities and programs.*

This hypothesis helped drive the campaign to build the first permanent Student Center on the Syracuse University campus, predicting that once the Center was constructed

- the building would be a place for joining together;
- out-of-classroom activities would be strong;
- the learning environment would be stronger;
- ergo, the university would be stronger.

The evaluation process has confirmed those predictions. Of students responding to the Fall '88 Student Perception of Student Life survey, 80 percent indicated the Student Center partially or completely meets their expectations. This information not only motivates staff and boosts morale, it provides the impetus to continue what works and strive to improve what doesn't. The ultimate winner is the campus community.

A very important part of the evaluation process is the demographics information it provides. Specific goals for the Student Center are tied to the types of users. The on-site surveys indicate a diverse population enjoys the Student Center. The user profile is similar to the University profile in terms of gender and housing.

The evaluation produces a great deal of operational data. Information on hours of operation, friendliness of staff, and even the desired

If professional evaluation resources are unavailable, recognize the limits of internal resources but . . . realize that any information is useful.

video games has enabled the Schine administration to evaluate, plan, and act on areas requiring attention.

How the information is used

The most effective use of the evaluation is in the planning process. Peter Baigent has developed a planning model based on the simple premise that evaluation is a dynamic process. Good management is prepared for change in the environment or in user attitudes. Because change is unpredictable, it is important to assess and act on the assessment. As administrators receive results, they incorporate them into the planning process. The planning process leads to new action and more assessment, and then the process is repeated.

The most important outcome is the opportunity to adapt to the change. Ongoing assessment provides information that can help create positive attitudes among the professional staff, the student employees, and most importantly, the users. For example, the process creates ownership of the Center among the building staff and the university community. In addition, the users recognize that the Schine Student Center is sensitive to topics that transcend topics such as multicultural issues, the quality of life, and service to their university community.

Operationally, the data was used to take action. For example, low ratings of building cleanliness were used to lobby for more custodial support. Prices were adjusted after discovering students had a negative perception of costs in the dining area. In addition, students identified their preferences for certain types of events. These events became priority programming. Video games and the type of music played in the game room were changed, based on what students said they wanted.

Perhaps the renovation of the lower level is the best example of all the evaluation forms uniting to have a major impact in the Student Center. The on-site surveys clearly indicated dissatisfaction with the appearance, the service, and the programs offered in that area. Student leaders were not satisfied with the spaces available to them for programming and were proposing changes they felt would better meet their needs. Focus groups that had been formulated to address the students' concerns received information from previous evaluations. This helped the groups focus on the true problem areas and provided a larger sample of the Schine Student user concerns. The process resulted in a group consensus that led to the renovation of the lower level. The information gathered was also instrumental in justifying funding for the project.

Clearly, this is testimony that assessment will help a campus better understand and meet the needs of its students and that evaluation should be an integral part of every college union's planning process.

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